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ABSTRACT

Among the issues facing teachers as the 21st century approaches are: the prevalence of violence, growing racial and socioeconomic divisions in society, and lack of parental involvement. Activities gathered from articles in educational journals are suggested to help children voice their experiences, thoughts, and concerns about violence. Some of these activities are: inviting a police representative to visit the classroom, having children become aware of violence on a favorite television program and then rewriting the show without violence, and helping children feel safe by assisting them in writing the names of people and places to which they can go when feeling scared. Teachers must be aware of not passing on cultural stereotypes; while elementary school children are not able to conceptualize socioeconomic differences in terms of profession and status, in the current consumer-oriented world, the advantages of wealth and disadvantages of poverty soon become evident to them. Also, teachers should learn as much as possible about the dynamics of their communities and recognize the messages that children are absorbing in their daily experience. Suggestions for promoting parental involvement include recruiting a volunteer to become a liaison between teacher and parents, showing respect for parents by treating them as co-workers rather than as free help, asking for parents' input, and thanking them for their participation. (ND)

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TEACHING IN THE 21st CENTURY

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TEACHING IN THE 21st CENTURY

Beyond computers, beyond whole language, far beyond project-based learning, there are issues every teacher must face when looking toward the 21st century. The year 2000 is rapidly approaching and as it nears we see the role of the teacher becoming more complex than ever. Never before have we had to deal with such issues as children becoming witness to and victims of extreme violence. Issues of race and class have become more evident as our society becomes more stratified economically and diversified culturally. Parent involvement is dramatically low as more and more children come from dual-income and single-parent families. What can we as teachers expect to do for our children as well as ourselves to prepare for this not so distant future?

As with most issues, the key to change and survival is awareness. Until a problem is recognized and acknowledged it usually remains untreated. Dr. James Garbarino, who authored an article in a recent volume of Instructor, claims that "every child today is affected by violence--somewhere." His research sites such horrifying statistics as American children being witness to more than 8,000 murders on television before leaving elementary school. Unfortunately a great number of children actually experience physical violence as well. While no statistics were given to suggest just how many children saw real violence in the home or were victim to it themselves, it was revealed that 160,000 children "miss school each day because they fear bodily injury, physical attack, or intimidation."

To acknowledge that we live in a violent world is a first step. However, to recognize the effects of violence and to address the issue is part of the expanding role of the teacher. Garbarino suggests that we communicate with fellow teachers about our concerns with and fears of living with violence. Teachers are also advised to communicate with parents about their plans to incorporate the theme of aggression into the curriculum as it a subject that can be uncomfortable. It is warned that resistance from parents could arise if they are of the belief that violence is a parental right as a means for discipline. Another reason for parental resistance might involve fear of disclosure of an abusive situation. More likely though parents will just need reassurance that the topic will be handled with care and within an educational framework.

To introduce the topic of violence, allow children to voice their experiences, thoughts, and concerns about the subject.. Invite a police representative to visit your

class. Garbarino advises choosing a representative who is sure to provide a positive image as many authority figures are seen as sources of violence within certain communities. Emphasize that the goal of the unit is to learn to feel safe. Teachers can do brainstorming activities with children to provide a vocabulary of words that are associated with violence. Children can generate a list of reasons why people sometimes hurt one another. Other suggestions include having children become aware of violence they witness on a favorite television program and then rewriting the show without the violence. An important exercise in helping children to feel safe is to assist them in writing down people and places to which they can go to when feeling scared.

While life in a violent world is a topic that deserves much attention, the lines between race and class are an ever growing concern. According to an article in Language Arts, curriculum that will equip children for the twenty-first century must include a value of ones primary language. It is stated that the need for "value of primary languages with ESL students is the key to closing the historical gap in literacy achievement between low-socioeconomic and minority students and main streamers." Issues of diversity and inequality must be explored by teachers and students in an authentic and hopeful way.

According to the research of Patricia Ramsey, children as young as three years of age can make distinctions between races and "accurately apply socially conventional labels of 'Black' and 'White'..." By elementary school, children can begin to apply social information, such as status, to physical attributes. It is with this awareness that teachers must begin to realize the impact of teaching that is culturally insensitive. Cultural stereotypes are passed on to children at a very young age and need not be obvious.

Children in elementary school are not able to conceptualize socioeconomic differences in terms of profession and status. However, in our consumer-oriented world, the understanding of advantages to wealth and disadvantages of poverty become evident. Children, then, must begin to deal with the contradictions of our society. While we teach our children to value equality and justice, they begin to observe and comprehend the racist ideologies and unequal distribution of resources. Children who are still young enough to believe in Santa Claus may begin to question why he is more giving to some children than to others.

Teachers are advised to learn as much as possible about the dynamics of the communities in which we live and teach, to uncover the messages that children are

absorbing in their daily experiences. Teachers can empower children to become activists within their communities. Stereotyped books can be "busted" by children when organizing a writing campaign to the publisher. Topics can be discussed at holidays, i.e. "Why do we celebrate Columbus Day?" to gain new understanding and sensitivity. In teaching children to see and challenge the contradictions and injustices in our society, we as a community can create change for the better.

The question remains, "How can we expect to make these changes without all the help and involvement we need?" Increasing parental involvement has become a goal in education for the entire nation. According to an article in Learning, "two-thirds of employed parents with kids under 18 acknowledged that they weren't spending enough time with their children; 40 percent felt they weren't devoting enough time to their children's education." With this fact in mind, can we hope to acheive this new awareness and sensitiviy towards violence and diversity?

The article suggests that we take parents where they are and not where we want them to be. In doing this we can discover ways to attain more parent involvement. Suggestions include recruiting a volunteer to become a liason between you and the parents. This person can be dedicated to communication and can help you stay in touch with parents. Many parents have only heard from their child's teacher when there is a problem. With this assistant, communication can become a much more positive experience. Parents may be more likely to lend assistance when given an option as to the kind of help needed. Not all parents are comfortable with a room full of children as not all are comfortable with computers or paper work.

One of the most important pieces of advice given in the article may have been nothing more than a necessary reminder. Show parents respect: treat them as co-workers instead of free help; ask for their input: and remember to say thank you.

While some see schools in the future as high-tech, computerized places where children and communities all work together to solve the problems of the world, this is only a possible part of reality. The truth is, what we thought was the future is not so far away. Yet the days of flying to school in our own private spaceships is still left to the cartoons. As we turn the corner and enter the 21st century, it must be with an awareness and sensitivity to violence, race and class diversity, and community involvement that we can hope to make a difference. It is imperative to our own survival as humans and it is our duty as teachers.

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